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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the research being completed in communication and business regarding the communication skills identified as important for college graduates beginning their careers. Perhaps even more important than research on instructional strategies and student learning styles, this research points the direction for needed instruction in the basic communication course. The research points to the importance of different skills needed for different situations--primarily in the group and interpersonal situations. It is concluded that the hybrid communication course is perhaps the most useful and practical course for undergraduate students. (Contains 12 references; a planning/competency model is attached.) (Author/CR)

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USING RESEARCH TO JUSTIFY INSTRUCTION IN THE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the research being completed in communication and business regarding the communication skills identified as important for college graduates beginning their careers. Perhaps even more important than research on instructional strategies and student learning styles, this research points the direction for needed instruction in the basic communication course.

The research points to the importance of different skills needed for different situations -- primarily in the group and interpersonal situations. The authors conclude, along with other communication scholars, that the hybrid communication course is perhaps the most useful and practical course for undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

All college and university accrediting agencies emphasize training in oral communication skills as central to a bonifide general education. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools articulates a clear position regarding the importance of communication in a student's undergraduate education; concluding, "If a general education program is based on cognitive experiences, it will typically describe its program in terms of college-level experience that engender such competencies as: capabilities in reading, writing, speaking, and listening" (p. 21). This emphasis on communication skills is central to all college and university accrediting agencies in the United States. Our discipline's focus on how students may be trained in communication in pursuit of education is germane and timely.

The research literature about communication skill training is substantial and consistent. Studies have repeatedly found that "giving information and making decisions with another person" (interpersonal communication) and "providing information to groups of individuals" (group communication and public speaking) are the most important communication skills for undergraduate students to learn prior to graduation. The focus on communication skills *training* is generally recognized to be central to any general education program.

Specific Skills

The National Center for Educational Statistics (1994), in a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, summarized a set of seven communication competencies for communication skills development. These included:

1. situational appropriateness
2. appropriate involvement and responsiveness
3. adaptability and flexibility in communication with others
4. clarity in communicating with others
5. efficiency of communication
6. goal accomplishment
7. politeness (pp. 132-133).

In a DELPHI study reported by Hugenberg, Robinson and Owens (1982), employers and communication educators were asked to identify vital communication skills for college graduates. The top ten skills included:

1. giving clear directions
2. listening well
3. listening to what the other person is really saying and feeling
4. establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with others
5. articulating accurately your position
6. collecting information before drawing conclusions

7. selecting the proper way to communicate a message to others
8. dealing with communication anxiety
9. identifying a logical format for organizing and presenting information to others
10. communicating information upward and downward competently in the organization.

These results have been corroborated by the College Placement Service whose 1993 study revealed that in addition to one's proficiency in a field of study, employers most highly value oral communication and interpersonal skills, followed by demonstrated teamwork and analytical skills (3). Curtis, Windsor and Stephens (1989) identified the top skills which young people need to become managers. Their survey of over one thousand personnel managers isolated these communication skills:

1. work well with others one-on-one
2. gather accurate information from others to make a decision
3. work well in small groups
4. listen effectively
5. and give effective feedback.

The importance of good communication skills for job applicants is reported in studies prepared by business organizations, communication scholars, and the United States Government.

In another attempt to identify competencies needed by college graduates, Career Services at Bowling Green State

University identified a six page list of learned and transferable skills. These skills included the following categories of competencies:

1. Planning and Organizational Skills
2. Oral and Written Communication Skills
3. Decision-Making, Supervisory, Management and/or Leadership Skills
4. Financial Management Skills
5. Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution Skills
6. Teamwork and Team-building Skills
7. Ethics and Tolerance Skills
8. Personal and Professional Management Skills
9. Transferable Skills
    a. Information Management Skills
    b. Design and Planning Skills
    c. Research and Investigation Skills
    d. Human Relations and Interpersonal Skills
    e. Critical Thinking Skills
    f. Management and Administration Skills
    g. Valuing Skills
    h. Personal and Career Development Skills

For a complete listing of these competencies see Appendix A. One can easily identify the needed communication skills for the college graduate from this list.

Collectively these studies and reports suggest that the communication skills which undergraduate students need to learn may be grouped into five, sometimes overlapping, areas:

Listening Skills.

- listen well
- listen effectively
- establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with others
- listening to what the other person is really saying and feeling
- politeness
- involvement and responsiveness
- gather accurate information from others to make a decision
- give effective feedback

Interpersonal Communication Skills.

- establish and maintain open lines of communication
- communicate both upward and downward competently in an organization
- give effective feedback
- involvement and responsiveness
- goal accomplishment
- politeness
- work well with others, one-on-one

- give effective feedback
- give clear directions

Group Communication Skills.

- establish and maintain open lines of communication
- give clear directions
- involvement and responsiveness
- adaptability and flexibility
- politeness
- work well with others, one-on-one
- collecting information before making a decision
- work well in small groups
- give effective feedback

Presentational Speaking (Public Speaking).

- gather accurate information from others
- articulate accurately your position
- deal with communication anxiety
- select the proper way to communicate a message to others
- give clear directions
- involvement and responsiveness
- adaptability and flexibility in communication with others
- communication efficiency
- goal accomplishment

- identifying a logical format for organizing and presenting information to others

Strategies for Being A Competent Communicator.

- articulate accurately your position
- select the proper way to communicate a message
- situational appropriateness
- involvement and responsiveness
- adaptability and flexibility
- communication efficiency
- identifying a logical format for organizing and presenting information to others
- goal accomplishment

Student Competencies

By further reviewing the literature and available instructional materials, communication faculty should be able to identify specific skills to be included in the basic communication course. These skills are within the normal teaching purview of communication faculty and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs); they are discrete and lend themselves to progress and outcome-based assessment; and they can be explained to non-communication instructors so as to enable faculty to monitor whether and how students in upper-level courses continue to use them, or not.

Listening.

1. Students can overcome barriers to effective listening.
2. Students can perform cognitive listening skills.
3. Students can perform expressive listening skills.
4. Students can perform transactional listening skills.

Interpersonal Communication.

1. Students can communicate specific levels of trust in their interpersonal communication.
2. Students understand the appropriate use power in their interpersonal communication.
3. Students can self-disclose appropriately.
4. Students understand the role of attraction in their interpersonal relationships.
5. Students know the skills and strategies for initiating effective interpersonal relationships with others.
6. Students know the skills and strategies for maintaining effective interpersonal relationships.
7. Students know the skills and strategies for terminating interpersonal relationships.
8. Students can exhibit the skills and strategies for conflict management.

Group Communication.

1. Students can demonstrate appropriate leadership skills in a group.

2. Students can evidence appropriate member roles in a group.
3. Students can demonstrate a variety of decision-making strategies.
4. Students can participate in constructive conflict resolution.
5. Students can express their ideas clearly to the group.
6. Students listen to all group members.

Presentational Speaking (Public Speaking).

1. Students can assess her or his listeners and use that assessment in preparing a speech.
2. Students can appropriately organize a speech.
3. Students can begin a speech appropriately.
4. Students can effectively conclude a speech.
5. Students can use transitions when delivering a speech.
6. Students can appropriately use supporting materials during a speech.
7. Students can prepare a competent informative speech.
8. Students can prepare a competent persuasive speech.
9. Students can deliver a speech competently.
10. Students can use visual aids competently during a speech.

Strategic Communication Skills.

1. Students can manage the communication context competently.
2. Students can use the strategies of persuasive communication competently.
3. Students can use nonverbal communication appropriate to her or his message and the situation.
4. Students use appropriate strategies to help listeners understand the verbal and nonverbal messages.
5. Students use appropriate strategies to help listeners remember her or his message.
6. Students use appropriate verbal communication strategies to accomplish the goals of communication.

Communication Skill Training: Examining the Myths

A commonly-held myth on many campuses needs to be dispelled: we "naturally" communicate well through speaking and hearing. This commonly-held but false belief takes root because people start talking almost before they start walking: hence, one may think that effective communication through talking is "easier" than walking, certainly easier than writing. It is not.

Second, there is no physical artifact of the oral/aural communication process. Speaking and listening are effervescent; and, while harder to do well (in the absence of written

correspondence), one's impression is the contrary. Said differently, written communication seems more difficult to do well because the message is available for public examination and reflective study. What one writes is designated, engineered, created, edited, and documented. What one says, though, must be arrived at in the mind. If written communication is like chess, oral communication is like chess without board or pieces.

It is not difficult to find a corresponding flaw in the suggestion that to improve a person's oral/aural communication competence, one simply needs to be encouraged to "do it more," to engage in more communication-type activities. That flaw is that practice in the absence of instruction tends to produce not competence, but well-practiced incompetence. In other words, practicing the wrong skills is just that, practicing the wrong skills.

The Foundation:
The Hybrid Communication Course

To set the stage for the ongoing communication skill development in undergraduate students, the basic communication course must establish the foundation. Seiler (1993), a national authority on communication education, wrote, "Because of the diversified nature and multi-plural society we are living in, the hybrid course has the flexibility and structure to adapt to change better than any of the other introductory speech

communication courses" (p. 52). The hybrid basic communication course introduces students to specific communication competencies in interpersonal communication, listening, group communication, pubic speaking, and the strategies needed to be a competent communicator. The hybrid course sets the all-important academic and skill foundation for students to develop their communication skills; the ones identified by professionals and alumni. In setting this foundation in the hybrid course, assignments in other courses can be used to further enhance a student's communication competence. These additional communication assignments are best utilized **after** specific communication skill training. This foundation must be established by the best qualified faculty with specific training in communication skill development and evaluation. In establishing these foundational skills in a beginning oral communication course, faculty in more advanced (intermediate) courses can reinforce these competencies instead of having to try to teach them at the expense of teaching the content of their own courses.

The course best suited to establish the foundations of communication competence for undergraduate students is the hybrid course. This course has been described in catalogs as an:

> Introduction to theories and techniques of preparing for, participating in and evaluating interpersonal, group and public communication. Application exercises included for student practice.

Students will be expected to achieve competence in each of the objectives listed above. In the hybrid course, students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of oral communication competencies identified as needing enhancement.

Communication Competencies
A Testing Alternative

With this identifiable set of communication competencies and body of knowledge, students can demonstrate an acceptable mastery of the communication competency knowledge base by passing a proficiency test. They can also demonstrate a mastery of the communication skills through a series of communication assignments. If students demonstrate sufficient understanding of the course content and possess the basic communication competencies, they should proceed to upper-level coursework to continue the development of their communication skills.

Communication Across the Curriculum

A second part of teaching students appropriate communication competencies in preparation for their careers is a communication across the curriculum program. This program continues the student's development of their communication competencies. The communication across the curriculum relies heavily on the

foundation of communication skill development established in the hybrid course.

In identifying competent communication as a specific set of skills, it is important to integrate communication skill training throughout the student's college experience -- similar to the reinforcement of writing skills intertwined in a writing across the curriculum program. With a strong foundation of oral communication skill competencies **and** appropriate training of faculty across the university, the quality of our students' communication will increase in recognizable ways. By teaching a core foundation of fundamental communication competencies in one communication course, students will be better able to practice appropriate skills and receive informed feedback from trained faculty in approved intermediate and upper-level courses -- regardless of major.

In discussing a communication across the curriculum program, Davilla, West, and Yoder (1993) wrote, "The basic communication course in communication serves as a template for the development of a CAC [Communication Across the Curriculum] program. . . . The CAC continues, expands, and embellishes the knowledge and skills learned in the basic communication course. This model works best when the basic course is a prerequisite for other CI [Communication Instruction] courses. Students learn the basic skills and knowledge from communication faculty and then continue to practice those skills in a variety of settings" (p. 86).

Discussion

It seems reasonable to develop a beginning communication course that develops communication skills that meet the needs of students as they enter their careers. This course is the hybrid course because it teaches students the basics in interpersonal, group, listening, and public communication skills. The diversity of skills in a prospective employee is clearly the agenda reported by employers. Communication educators should rise to the challenge and offer these skills in the one communication course most students take during their undergraduate studies.

Universities should meet the same challenge by requiring students to take additional oral communication-intensive courses during their undergraduate studies. Communication faculty stand ready to implement a communication across the curriculum program and train faculty interested in enhancing the communication skills of their students.

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Appendix A

COMPETENCIES DEFINED

From

BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

CAREER SERVICES

http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/careers/process/competen.html#transfer

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Competencies Defined

Skills are obtained through full or part-time work, volunteering for a campus or off-campus organization, completing an internship or through extracurricular activities. You already have some transferrable skills which can be used in any occupation. Speaking, listening, greeting people, writing, meeting deadlines, operating expensive equipment - cars, computers - developing a sense of humor, and maintaining a budget are examples of learned skills.

- Planning and Organizational Skills
- Oral and Written Communication Skills
- Decision-Making, Supervisory, Management and/or Leadership Skills
- Financial Management Skills
- Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution Skills
- Teamwork and Teambuilding Skills
- Ethics and Tolerance Skills
- Personal and Professional Management Skills
- Transferable Skills
  - Information Managment Skills
  - Design and Planning Skills
  - Research and Investigation Skills
  - Communications Skills
  - Human Relations and Interpersonal Skills
  - Critical Thinking Skills
  - Management and Administrative Skills
  - Valuing Skills
  - Personal and Career Development Skills

Planning and Organizational Skills

- Follow up with others to evaluate progress of tasks
- Conduct meetings
- Give praise and credit to others for work well done
- Motivate others on group projects
- Facilitate brainstorming activities
- Develop goals for an organization
- Work effectively with organization members
- Identify tasks to be accomplished
- Prioritize tasks
- Facilitate discussions on program planning processes
- Give constructive feedback

Top | Bottom

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Oral and Written Communication Skills

- Organize and present ideas effectively for formal and spontaneous speeches
- Effectively participate in group discussions
- Prepare concise and logically written materials
- Listen carefully and respond to verbal and nonverbal messages
- Effectively utilize campus resources for public relations
- Respond appropriately to positive and negative feedback
- Debate issues without being abrasive to others
- Possess courteous telephone skills

Top | Bottom

Decision-Making, Supervisory, Management and/or Leadership Skills

- Understand the steps involved with effective decision-making
- Facilitate groups in the decision-making process
- Implement sound decisions
- Take responsibility for decisions
- Evaluate the effects and effectiveness of a decision
- Be able to make decisions without feeling pressured
- Remain flexible with decisions
- Explain to others unpopular decisions
- Motivate others toward common goals
- Use effective coaching/mentoring skills with peers or subordinates

Top | Bottom

Financial Management Skills

- Develop a budget accurately estimating expenses and income
- Justify the organization's budget to others
- Work within a budget
- Keep accurate and complete financial records
- Ensure timeliness of payments
- Develop and implement a fund-raising event

Top | Bottom

Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution Skills

- Anticipate problems before they occur

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- Define the problem and identify possible/apparent causes
- Identify possible alternative solutions and select the most appropriate ones
- Facilitate group members in identifying and evaluating possible solutions
- Develop plans to implement solutions
- Handle several problems at one time
- Understand the steps involved with critical thinking
- Recognize if a problem needs to be addressed

Top | Bottom

Teamwork and Teambuilding Skills

- Motivate team members to work toward common goals
- Understand strengths and weaknesses of members and use strengths to build team development
- Collaborate on projects
- Support and praise one another for reaching goals and accomplishments

Top | Bottom

Ethics and Tolerance Skills

- Define and explain ethical behavior
- Practice ethical behavior in difficult situations
- Accept others' opinions and actions in a non-judgmental way
- Understand sexist, racist, ageist, and homophobic behavior and exhibit non-sexist, non-racist, non-ageist, and non-homophobic behavior
- Interact with and appreciate people from diverse cultural, social, and religious backgrounds
- Interact with and appreciate physically or mentally challenged individuals

Top | Bottom

Personal and Professional Management Skills

- Work effectively under pressure
- Manage time and stress effectively
- Seek additional opportunities for professional development
- Regularly participate in a healthy combination of activities for stress management
- Arrive at work at an appropriate time
- Evaluate personal and professional strengths and weaknesses
- Take initiative in job related duties
- Discern appropriate behaviors for the workplace.

Top | Bottom

(developed by Paul Breen, San Francisco State University)

Transferable Skills

Information Management Skills

- sort data and objects
- compile and rank information
- apply information creatively to specific problems or tasks
- synthesize facts, concepts, and principles
- understand and use organizing principles
- evaluate information based on appropriate standards

Top | Bottom

Design and Planning Skills

- identify alternatives courses of action
- set realistic goals
- follow through with a plan or decision
- manage time effectively
- predict future trends and patterns
- accommodate multiple demands for commitment of time, energy, and resources
- assess needs
- make and keep a schedule
- set priorities

Top | Bottom

Research and Investigation Skills

- use a variety of sources of information
- apply a variety of methods to test the validity of data
- identify problems and needs
- design an experiment, plan, or model that systematically defines a problem
- identify information sources appropriate to special needs or problems
- formulate questions relevant to clarifying a particular problem, topic, or issue

Top | Bottom

Communication Skills

- listen with objectivity and paraphrase the content of a message
- use various forms and styles of written communication
- speak effectively to individuals and groups
- use various media to present ideas imaginatively
- express one's need, wants, opinions and preferences without offending the sensitivities of others
- identify and communicate value judgments effectively
- describe objects or events with few errors
- convey a positive self image to others

Top | Bottom

Human Relations and Interpersonal Skills

- keep a group "on track" and moving toward the achievement of a goal
- maintain group cooperation and support
- delegate tasks and responsibilities
- interact effectively with peers, superiors, and subordinates
- express one's feelings appropriately
- understand the feelings of others
- use argumentation techniques to persuade others
- make commitments to people
- be will to take risks
- teach a skill, concept, or principle to others
- analyze behavior or self and others in group situations
- demonstrate effective social behavior in a variety of settings and under different circumstances
- work under time and environmental pressures

Top | Bottom

Critical Thinking Skills

- identify quickly and accurately the critical issues when making a decision or solving a problem
- identify a general principle that explains interrelated experiences of factual data
- define the parameters of a problem
- identify reasonable criteria for assessing the value or appropriateness of an action or behavior
- adapt one's concepts and behavior to changing conventions and norms
- apply appropriate criteria to strategies and action plans
- take given premises and reason to their conclusion
- create innovative solutions to complex problems
- analyze the interrelationships of events and ideas from several perspectives.

Top | Bottom

Management and Administration Skills

- analyze tasks
- identify people who can contribute to the solution of a problems or task
- identify resource materials useful in the solution of a problem
- delegate responsibility for completion of a task
- motivate and lead people
- organize people and tasks to achieve specific goals

Top | Bottom

Valuing Skills

- assess a course of action in terms of its long-range effects on the general human welfare
- make decisions that will maximize both individual and collective good
- appreciate the contributions of art, literature, science and technology to contemporary society
- identify one's own values
- assess one's values in relation to important life decisions

Top | Bottom

Personal and Career Development Skills

- analyze and learn form life experiences - both one's own and others
- relate the skills developed in one environment (school, for instance) to the requirements of another environment (work)
- match knowledge about one's own characteristics and abilities to information about job or career opportunities
- identify, describe, and assess the relative importance of one's needs, values, interest, strengths, and weaknesses
- develop personal growth goals that are motivating
- identify and describe skill acquired through formal education and general life experiences
- identify one's own strengths and weaknesses
- accept and learn from negative criticism
- persist with a project when faced with failure unless it is clear that the project cannot be carried out or is not worth the time or effort required to complete it
- generate trust and confidence in others
- take risks
- accepts the consequences of one's actions
- market" one's self to prospective employers

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